

WHO PAYS?

Unto Herself Alone

By EDWIN BLISS

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FIFTH STORY.

John Halstead's hands trembled as he shut his desk. Very slowly the roll top unfolded, reluctantly shutting out neat stacks of papers and correspondence, the paper-weight of another period, the quill pens, the rusty ink-wells, all the commonplaces of a man's work. Moisture gathered in the king's eyes. Old friends they were, friends with whom he had spent his best 30 years. Together they had fought and suffered, together they had fast and won countless victories and skirmishes. And now the separation hour had come. Halstead was through.

The old lion had finished with a victory, but one so bitterly fought he realized another battle would mean inevitable defeat. The young whelps of this Wall street jungle had grown so formidable that when they fell upon him the issue had been a long time in doubt. But he had won. But at the price of a broken spirit and body and a bitter regret. And so it was in no pleasant mood that he arrived home.

He stepped softly into his home, moving toward the library. He wanted to be alone to compose himself, to readjust himself to the conditions of an altered existence. He did not wish wife or daughter to see him in the hour when he was forced to look upon the borders of the end.

A note lay upon the desk and he picked it up, absently glancing over the brief writing. He turned the sheet and, as his eye fell upon the signature, a wild ferocious gleam flamed up within them. He reached out and clutched the desk for support, clutched so tightly the knuckles gleamed a shiny blue-black. Mastering himself with an effort he dispatched a servant for his wife and daughter, still standing in the same position when they entered the room, the note in his hands, such an expression of hatred and inflexible determination upon his face as caused them to halt abruptly, checking their affectionate greetings.

"You have answered this—man, Esther?" Straight to the point he cut, his voice shaking a trifle with the rage he masterfully held in check. As she did not answer, he slowly crumpled the paper in the palm of his hand, letting it drop to the floor. The hurt expression in her eyes broke his control.

"Then you shall answer it—now. Do you know that Felix Lynn is the man I have just beaten, that he tried to ruin me, that he has worn out the last atom of my strength, that the fight has forced me to retire? Felix Lynn is the man who has just failed in his attempt to ruin this household. And Felix Lynn is the man who has the audacity to invite a member of this household to christen his new yacht! Felix Lynn must be a stranger to this door. You will neither speak to him nor have any communication with him. And you will give him to understand that—NOW." Esther rebelled at first, but at a significant gesture from her mother, wrote the fateful note:

Felix dear: Father stumbled on your note and raised such a storm it will be impossible for mother and me to christen your yacht. We must be so careful, you know. Why not ask Alicia and her mother to go?
ESTHER.

The smoldering rebellion that had been banked so long within the very soul of Alicia Knight leaped suddenly into full flame. For just a second, as she defiantly faced her mother, she realized that now was the time for final assertion of the manner in which she proposed to live her life.

Mrs. Knight indolently resumed her book, unconscious of the crisis she had precipitated by her refusal to allow her daughter to christen Felix Lynn's yacht, heedless of the hurt she had inflicted. She looked up as Alicia stamped her foot.

"I tell you I shall go. I told him over the phone that I was coming, and I am. If you won't chaperon me I'll go alone. I'm sick and tired of silly conventions hedging me away from everything I want to do. It's my life I'm living and I'm not going to live it for the world but for myself."

Mrs. Knight frowned slightly as the girl stormed away, then resumed her reading. So gradual had been the increasing violence of Alicia's rebellions she did not realize how close they stood to the brink of the precipice. She looked up again as her daughter stood, framed in the doorway, a yachting cap tilted a little defiantly upon her pretty head.

"I'm going to the yacht," Alicia announced.

Mrs. Knight rose swiftly. There had been something incisive, decisive and unbending about the way Alicia announced her destination that revealed a vision of herself many years before. She, too, had been rebellious, and it was the very violence of her own nature that made her so fearful of breaking the conventions, realizing

the untold lengths to which she might go, once started. Alicia laughed lightly and closed the door behind her.

The launching was a success, and after it was over handsome Felix Lynn took Alicia home. The butler met her at the door and handed out this note:

Alicia: Your latest defiance of all feminine law has closed my home to you. I have placed one-half of your father's fortune to your credit. Your maid and trunk are at the Goldcrest apartments. Mother.

III.

There was the hint of longing on Esther Halstead's face as Alicia finished showing her through the dainty little Goldcrest apartment. Not the longing for freedom which seemed the principal reason for Alicia's delight; not the pride for ownership the younger girl had displayed, but the thought of how perfectly it would serve as a setting for the life she had imagined with the man she loved, the picturing of Felix Lynn occupying special little nooks and corners of the apartment—that was what brought the tears all unconsciously to her eyes.

"And you will come to my reception—just a little house-warming tomorrow afternoon, Esther?"

She started to shake her head in dissent, smiling at the eagerness of the girl to begin making the most of her new-found liberty. But Alicia prattled on before she had time to answer.

"First I'm going to ask Felix Lynn and—"

Esther's lips parted in a smile. She could not forego the delight of seeing him again. True, she owed a great deal to her ailing father. But she owed a debt to this other man as well.

While Alicia darted to the phone, intent upon carrying out her plan immediately it entered her head, Esther thought it over. Was she doing right or wrong?

"Felix is living on his yacht now," Alicia poutingly announced as she re-entered the room.

Esther smiled lightly as she took her leave. Lacking irresponsibility herself, it was charmingly delightful to her in others. And it was so becoming to Alicia, her naive delight in this freedom from restraint. She was still laughing as she left the house and came back to her own distressing responsibilities.

So engrossed in fact, she did not turn back and see Alicia slipping lightly down the street in the opposite direction. Even her innocent mind would have suspected that the young girl was about to do something which, to put it mildly, might have been termed indiscreet.

For Alicia Knight's very back bristled with defiance, her pretty chin was uplifted and her eyes looked out a bit insolently upon pedestrians as though



Alicia Flings the Cobwebbed Bottle Against the Prow of Lynn's Yacht.

defying them. Now and then she would halt dubiously, biting her lips thoughtfully, a little fearfully, then quickly resume her journey.

It was the hour immediately before the curtain of night descends upon the twilight that Captain Judd looked up sharply at a hail from the dock.

While he waited at top of the landing stairs for the girl, he wondered mightily as Alicia Knight lightly climbed beside him. What in the name of common sense could this young woman want aboard the yacht at such an hour? And what should he do? And then Captain Judd did exactly as most people do when puzzled. He pointed toward the rail where the owner stood dreamily staring out to sea.

Lynn was tired, very tired, and the rest he sought out here upon the equally troubled sea came not so readily as he had expected. The very soul of him chafed at John Halstead's bitter mandate that he was to be a stranger at his home.

Alicia Knight—A slight smile curved his lips as he recalled the beautiful, wild, young creature, Alicia Knight—untamed, rebellious at conventions, heedless of the morrow, in

love with life! Why could not Esther have some of the—

A little laugh, a bit timid despite its bravado, made him turn swiftly. It was as though a Merlin had waved his wand and materialized his thoughts. He could not quite conceal his pleasure at sight of Alicia, looking at him a little defiantly, a little bashfully, as she stood just a few feet away. He could not quite cloak the insincerity of his reproaches, allowed them to be snuffed out completely as her fingers brushed lightly against his own as side by side they leaned against the taffrail.

A wisp of her hair was taken by the roguish breeze and fluttered across his cheek. The perfume of it intoxicated him. And yet it was but a part of the night. He reached out his hand to put the vagrant lock in place. His finger tips moved across her cheek and the thrill was but another of this wondrous night's myriad phases. Her eyes sought his own, bathed in the question, the wild, unharnessed wonder she read there.

IV.

The dazzle of Alicia's spirits was bewildering, the glorious excitement of the girl so boundless it transmitted itself to every guest at the reception. The very air was vibrant with it. But Felix Lynn alone seemed immune, as he moved silently from place to place, a little absent, a little apart from everyone and everything.

But the hostess, try though she would, could not keep her eyes from wandering in his direction, could not repress the little thrilling pride of possession as she picked him out instantly from the throng, nor suppress the twinge of jealousy that he should not be with her alone.

Times there were when the brain of her would halt and a soft, dreamy expression supplant the eager, restless one in her eyes. And she would come back to the present, gently put by the dreams of the past and future which had reached out and touched her, put them by with a smile that glorified the beautiful face of her, erasing the thoughtless lines there as by the passing of a huge spiritual sponge over her countenance.

And Felix Lynn avoided her sedulously, seemed unable to be near her. She noticed it but convinced herself it was merely another phase of this strange jealousy that so completely possessed her. She was also keenly delighted to see he avoided Esther Halstead. She had thought Esther a bit overly interested in Felix.

She started from her reverie and, with a gay laugh, ladled a glass from the punch bowl. But here eyes were fastened inquiringly upon her maid, who was just returning from the phone. Somehow, the dazed, somewhat frightened expression on the girl's face alarmed her. She shivered slightly as though a cold, dank shadow had passed across the sunlight of her happiness.

She would have stopped the maid, then thrust the impulse aside, though, as the girl approached Esther, she could not resist bending her ear in that direction.

She caught the cold, dazed look that filmed Esther Halstead's eyes as she received the message, caught the meaningless sound of her voice as she parroted the words: "My—father—dead—" caught the sympathetic forward surge of friends, then, with a shrinking within herself, noticed the swift stride with which Felix Lynn reached the stricken girl's side.

Like a tigress she moved forward, swaying a little from the hips, her eyes blazing. Felix Lynn drew Esther a bit closer to him, then thrust out his jaw squarely, speaking over her bowed head:

"Please do not crowd—please. My wife's father has just died. The marriage was kept secret to prevent this very thing."

For a moment Alicia felt her limbs numb, felt something go icy cold within her, then crackle up with a sound perfectly audible to herself. And then the numbness gave way to a prickling, as of a thousand needles. And then the banked fire burst into full flame. It was a lie. It was untrue. It could not be true. It was a lie told to trick her. But they could not do it. She sprang forward, thrusting herself between the pair, hurling them away from one another with vicious strength.

"It's a lie—a lie. It can't be true. I tell you it's a lie. He's mine—mine, mine by every moral law."

Her eyes, a pointed flame, she could see nothing of the shrinking guests, nobody in the room but the man, the man she claimed. Again she would have leaped forward as Felix Lynn threw out his hands in passionate appeal toward the woman he had just acknowledged as his wife. Then a slow, cruel smile parted her lips, revealing a row of small, sharp teeth, too white and even to be beautiful, teeth that strengthened the pantherish impression she gave. For Esther Halstead, with a cry of anguish and fear, shrank away from him as from an unclean thing.

Alicia did not know how the guests had felt, was not conscious, would not have cared had she been conscious, of their furtive leave takings. She only knew that Felix Lynn remained, that she had held him, that she would continue to hold him.

"You, you—" She could not continue for the torrent of rage that threatened to engulf her. "Oh, but you shall suffer for this," she finally managed to articulate. "You thought you would come to me—thought you would shame me—thought you would amuse yourself with me. Well, you have had your play. And now you shall pay. And you will pay to me

as no man ever paid to woman before, you—you—thief."

Before the poisonous hiss of her he shrank away. But in the hallway he covered his face with his hands that he might shut out the picture focused there of the terrible expression in her eyes.

V.

The nine days' sensation died away, for the morsel of any scandal, no odds how savory and juicy to begin with, grows flat and pulpy with too much dithering. But the cheeks of Felix Lynn grew more and more sunken and the shadows under the fine eyes of the man seemed to have eaten hollows there, hollows from out of which a fearful light burned, the light of a man afraid to look at something, yet, by some terrible attraction, always forced to look.

There were whispers that the prestige he had won in the street was waning, that he seemed unable to concentrate, to put the old-time fire



Alicia Learns That Esther Is Lynn's Wife.

in his work. The old Felix Lynn was gone, lost, for this reclusive was not the brilliant, powerful young Felix Lynn.

Wearily he closed down his desk and left his office.

He glanced warily up and down the narrow, winding street as he moved swiftly toward his motor car. It was as though he had tried to identify his terror in the crowd and, not finding it, sought temporary refuge in the machine. Always he was craning his head from side to side with the quick, darting movements of a frightened bird. And finally, with a weary sigh of relief, he sank back against the cushions of the car, relief lightening his face. His hand groped for the speaking tube and after a moment's hesitation he directed the chauffeur to the Halstead residence.

At the curb he leaped out lightly. His lips moved in an exclamation of relief and then the haunted expression suddenly hurled across his face, transfiguring it. For a limousine slowly moved toward him, the face at the glass causing him to shrink away afraid.

Alicia looked at the man, then slowly descended from the car and stood before him. He opened his mouth as though to speak but the cold, expressionless face of the girl halted him. Motionless she stood. Fixedly she stared. Stared as though at an inanimate object instead of the man she was slowly driving insane with her torture.

He turned quickly away and, with a shrug of the shoulders, moved up to the steps, pressing the bell rapidly, his very back indicating his fear of that silent woman on the walk below. The butler deferentially opened the door, his face expressing the perfect mixture of complacency and deference always to be found upon the ideal servant's countenance. Something very like surprise crossed his face as he saw who waited, then he quickly closed the door, almost slammed it in the man's face.

Felix Lynn's shoulders slumped again as he half turned. He dreaded crossing the dead icy light in the eyes of the woman who waited below. For months now she had tortured him in this fashion. For months she had appeared always beside him, staring, staring at him from those accusing eyes, and never a word—never a word from those lips that had last hurled at him the epithet—"thief." Like a haunted, hunted beast he looked toward the garden, then, in some swift impulse, as his eyes caught a glimpse of Esther seated on a bench there, he moved hurriedly in her direction.

She shrank away as she saw who had caused the quick crunch of gravel, but something on the face of the man made her stop. He held out his arms to her, not arms that would embrace but arms that pleaded for help, a little comfort, and, yes, a little protection.

For a moment he did not speak, could not speak, then all the floodgates were loosened, all the restraint was shattered and the suffering, torn and lacerated soul of the man stood before her, unabashed at its nakedness, only asking the balm of forgiveness.

"No, not even forgiveness, Esther," he pleaded brokenly. "I only wish the chance to try and help. I have sinned, Esther, but God knows, I have paid, am paying and shall pay until the memory of that sin is wiped away from all our minds. From our hearts it can never go. I love you—but we will not speak of that. I only ask one little word—one little word of comfort. And it will make me strong."

I don't wish the strength for myself I only want it that I may help you. I know you, Esther. I know that the memory of our love cannot be erased from such a soul as yours. I know that I have turned that beautiful thing into a wound that hurts. And I only ask you for the chance to let me help—help in any way I can. Because the helping you would do so much to help me." The vehemence of his passion subsided as he saw his pleading having effect. His voice lowered and he came a step closer.

"We may not be together, Esther," he said. "We may be very far apart. Once before we were far apart, you remember, and you said to me then that you knew it was hard, that often-times it seemed unfair but that if we loved one another as we thought we loved, we would fight the hardships, shoulder to shoulder. And the contact of the shoulder of the loved one would help so much. Don't you remember that, little girl? Well, I did not fight bravely. I did not fight fairly. I did not fight the man's fight as you fought the woman's. But I tried, Esther. I tried. And now I ask you, I beg of you to fight with me—shoulder to shoulder—your shoulder against my own."

She felt the soul of her going out to this man who seemed, by his very voice, to be stirring every chord in her being. She swayed slightly toward him. Then her hand reached up in half surrender. It was no use fighting. She loved him. She loved—

She shrank away even as she turned. The light that had flamed high in her eyes died even as she turned them upon him. For, in the turning, her eyes had encountered the hard, expressionless ones of Alicia Knight, staring impassively at the scene from beyond the shrubbery.

Lynn followed the direction of her eyes and met those of Alicia Knight—those eyes which would always come in between life and the fruition of his happiness, an ever-present shadow so dense and thick as to form an impenetrable barrier.

Esther shrank as he would have renewed his plea, for he was fighting for his very life now. He turned helplessly away. He only wished to be away—away from the woman who haunted him with those eyes of accusation.

He went to his yacht, curtly directing the astonished captain to put out immediately to sea.

It was only a scant two hours later that the yacht was hailed by a puffing tug that had been trying to overhaul them the half hour gone. At the top of the landing stage the captain waited for the passengers the tug-captain had told him he wished to board.

His eyes grew round with wonder as Alicia Knight moved past him, up the stairs, across the deck and toward the cabin. Yet a different Alicia Knight than the girl who had so gayly queened it over the entire christening party, a different Alicia Knight from the laughing girl who had come to the yacht another evening.

He had heard something of the scandal and had wondered whether it had anything to do with Lynn's altered manner. And now he wondered whether he should not detain the girl who moved so slowly, so remorselessly across the deck toward the cabin stairs. He started forward to detain her when the owner came heavily, wearily up the stairs. His listless, dull gaze fell upon the girl and then he staggered back as from a heavy blow in the face.

Captain Judd moved away, some impulse drawing him out of range of the sight. For a long time the eyes of the pair held, then the passionately bitter cry of Felix Lynn sounded resonantly, appealingly over the waters: "For God's sake, won't you end this torture? Always those eyes and never a word. Marry me—Be my wife. But end this torment—this hell on earth you have created for me."

Something in the voice halted the captain.

"Marry me, Alicia. I owe it to you. Marry me and—"

Captain Judd turned the corner of the wheel house barely in time to see the silent figure of the woman. Then he caught the slow, deliberate negative shake of her head. For a moment something in the attitude of Lynn held him. Then he sprang forward as, with a wild curse, Felix Lynn snatched a deck chair and darted upon the woman.

She leaped aside behind another chair and the one in Felix Lynn's flailing hands smashed down upon it with such a force it was torn from his grip. He seized another, that same insane series of cries racking his throat, and leaped upon her, closer—closer even as her shrieks of terror brought the crew on the run.

Captain Judd leaped at the madman, circling him with arms and legs, finding himself being tossed about by the man's maniacal strength like a pygmy. Others joined him and, under a tangle of legs and arms and bodies, Felix Lynn was borne to the deck.

And Alicia Knight, trembling like a runaway horse, stood close and watched, her eyes luminous now, her face twitching in sympathy at every sound of the madman—the man she had driven to this pass.

"There's a private sanitarium on—" She did not hear any more. She only knew that her whole heart was going out to the man they held so tightly, the man whose eyes blazed so fiercely when they rested upon her, the man who redoubled his struggles so long as she was near.

VI.

Doctor Bredner looked down at the struggling Felix Lynn. Old friends

they had been and, somehow, the spectacle struck deep at something within him he had thought long since crusted over.

He had listened carefully to the captain's report and dove-tailed the scene with the chance gossip he had heard. At times Lynn was quiet, at other times he would rave and tear in the grip of the attendants with the strength of ten men. And always in these struggles would he be pursued by the eyes and the lips that never opened.

Finally with a shrug, the doctor left the place, a rather foolish smile upon his face, a certain decision in his step that came from the indecision actuating a move that his associates might have construed as partaking of the sentimental. He turned in at the Halstead residence, finding Esther there clad in deep mourning. He plunged squarely at the heart of the matter.

"Miss Halstead," he began quickly, "I have come to you on behalf of your husband—" He lifted his hand as she drew quickly away from him, her eyes hardening with decision.

"Felix Lynn has suffered a complete mental breakdown. Not the breakdown which demands a few weeks' rest but the sort that may possibly be cured if the correct methods are applied immediately."

"You mean—he is—"

"Insane, Miss Halstead. Yes, that is what I mean. He is violently insane. I would not ask you to take any risk but—"

Her eyes flared defiantly, while her shoulders straightened.

"I am not afraid."

His eyebrows lifted in surprise as Esther suddenly left the room, to reappear almost immediately, her hat on for the street. Without a word she took his arm and moved out the house with him.

Felix was struggling in the grip of a powerful attendant when she entered the room. And then a great pity and love welled within her and lighted the eyes of her as she moved toward this man who had been her husband. He looked up at her as her hand fell upon his shoulder. Doctor Bredner watched the scene eagerly, a slow smile playing about the corners of his mouth, as Lynn ceased to struggle, looked up into the tender eyes fastened upon him, then sank back quietly in his chair.

He was about to tiptoe out the room, away from the scene, when sounds of a struggle in the corridor reached his ears. He moved swiftly toward the door, annoyed at the distraction, then was brushed aside by a woman who darted into the room, away from the attendant, stood a moment in the doorway, then flung herself upon her knees at the right side of the patient, flinging her arms about him and bursting into a wild paroxysm of regret and love.

She lifted her eyes, conscious of another's presence. Esther did not flinch as she met those eyes, did not yield by an inch her possession of this man she loved.

Doctor Bredner stepped forward, a bit stunned at the situation. The battle of two women for the right to care for the helpless one they both



Driven Insane by Her Ceaseless Persecution, Lynn Tries to Kill Alicia.

loved. For the madman had become a child once more, a child to be cared for, to be waited on, to suffer for, to live for, and to die for.

Slowly—slowly Alicia relaxed her hold, then the eyes of Felix Lynn traveled slowly down and rested upon her. A moment he stared, one terrible moment which caused Alicia to shrink fearfully away from him and made Esther cling the tighter to the hand she held.

Then, at the savage, bestial guttural of rage that came from his throat, doctor and attendant leaped forward, restraining him or he would have lunged at the woman who had driven him to this pass. Like bits of tissue paper he tossed them about, tossed them about till he wore himself out from his own efforts. But the eyes that stared, that glared out at them were the eyes of one whose brain had suffered irreparable shock at the moment of finest balance.

"Is there no way—no way to bring him back?" asked Esther.

And the only answer was the mocking echo that two women knew was always to ring in their ears:

"Pay—Pay—Pay—"

Who Pays?
End of "Unto Herself Alone."
The Next Story is "Houses of Glass."